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Discursive Formation of National Identity:

The Legacy of the Bauls of Bengal and Fakir Lalon Shah

Md. Mamunur Rahman

1. Introduction

The Bauls are the wandering minstrels of the rural Bengal, who sing devotional songs to the accompaniment of traditional musical instruments. In 2005, UNESCO inscribed Baul songs on the representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. Originally ‘Baulism’ emerged as a mystic cult in the seventeenth century, yet its socio-political implications became remarkably visible with the advent of the most prominent Baul master, Fakir Lalon Shah (1774-1890), who turned it into a popular movement engaging in the social and cultural politics in colonial Bengal. Lalon Shah composed several thousand songs, of which around five hundreds are now available. His songs have been translated into a number of languages including English, French, Hindi and Japanese.

The emergence of various religious cults in Bengal in the past centuries is often attributed to the social and economic deprivation of the subaltern class.¹ The millennium-old Hindu caste system was a major source of deprivation and suffering of the lower-caste people who were both literally and metaphorically *dalit* or ‘crushed underfoot’. Deemed as polluted, they were doomed to do some hereditarily fixed jobs considered as equally polluted like them. The same caste hierarchy tended to replicate in the Muslim community where the lower-class members were denigrated to the category of untouchables. The plight of the rural poor was further aggravated by the introduction of the British East India Company rule in 1757—the colonial land policy of ‘permanent settlement’, which allowed landlords to extract any amount of tax from peasants, became an infamous exploitative tool. Again, the ‘divide and rule’ policy of the British rulers, encouraging Hindus and Muslims to imagine themselves as two distinct communities separated by religion, was another major blow to the social health of Bengal.

In the nineteenth century, a group of Bengali people educated in the English system of education took active role in various reform movements to modernize their society ravaged by prejudices, injustice and inequalities. However, these reform movements were mostly communal in connotation and known as either Hindu or Muslim movements. The so-called ‘Bengali Renaissance’,

¹ See Abul Ahsan Choudhury, *Lalon Shaier Shondhane (In Search of Lalon Shain)* (Dhaka: Palal Prokashony, 2007) p. 60.

which refers to the social, cultural and intellectual changes resulted from the initiatives of the English educated Bengali people, was basically urban-centered—it could not touch the vast majority of the rural poor who, already marginalized by the century-old caste prejudice and class discrimination, now became exposed to the exploitative colonial rule.

Against this backdrop, Fakir Lalon Shah spearheaded the non-conformist ‘Baul’ movement to realize his vision of a society free from any discrimination on grounds of religion, class, caste or gender. The Baul cult in Bengal was basically syncretic in nature; Lalon Shah attempted to use this syncretism to pose a challenge to the dominant social and religious discourses of his time. His goal was to bring about “a shifting in power arrangements to benefit those previously lacking in either formal or informal prerogatives or influences.”² In this way, he left his own version of a tolerant and secular social order, which has been accepted at various degrees by the secular-leaning people, but also challenged by the reactionary forces of the society. Therefore, this paper looks at how the legacy of the Baul movement led by Lalon Shah has moved through contestation and negotiation to influence the identity politics in Bengal.³

2. Emergence of the Baul doctrine as an alternative to religious compartmentalization

The etymological meaning of the word ‘Baul’ is mad. The word is used rather metaphorically “to indicate a type of mendicant religious singer who, dressed in tattered clothes deliberately made up of the garments of both Hindus and Muslims, wanders from village to village celebrating God in ecstatic songs, existing on whatever his listeners choose to give him.”⁴ The Bauls are ‘mad’ because they abjure prevalent norms of the society in matters of dress and hair-style. Also they are ‘fakirs’ because they willingly renounce worldly interest in their quest for spiritual truth. They sing Baul songs to convey their philosophy about life, death, social equity and justice. There is a distinct guru-disciple based cult practice among them—a disciple is initiated to Baul rites by a veteran master.

The cult practices of the Bauls effectively overcome any divide along religious lines, inviting devotees from both the Hindu and Muslim communities. This has been possible through a strange sort of hybridity, in which they discursively appropriate and abrogate mainstream religious beliefs as well as existing folk philosophy. Most researchers opine that Baulism owed its birth to Shri Chaytannya (1486-1533) who initiated devotion-based *Vaisnavism* in Nadia district of Bengal with a view to reforming Hindu caste system. The succeeding years saw the intermingling of *Vaisnavism* with other great ideas of the equality of human beings, such as Islamic *Sufism* and Buddhist *Sahajya*

² Julia M. Allen and Lester Faigley, “Discursive Strategies for Social Change: An Alternative Rhetoric of Argument.” *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1995) p. 143. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/465666>.

³ Bengal was divided into two segments in the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent—its west wing forms the Indian state of West Bengal while East Bengal is now the independent country, Bangladesh.

⁴ Edward C. Dimock, Jr, “Rabindranath Tagore, ‘The Greatest of the Bauls of Bengal’.” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Nov. 1959) p. 36. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2943448>.

philosophy.⁵ In the nineteenth century, Baul doctrine spread in far off regions of Bengal, thanks to the charismatic leadership and musical creativity of Fakir Lalon Shah. His disciples still sing Baul songs at his mausoleum and “maintain the ascetic practices of *baul*, which are inherited through the master-disciple relations directly from the saint Lalon Shah himself.”⁶

The Bauls attach absolute importance to human beings rather than any supernatural entity; human body is the Baul equivalent of God, and so they search God in it. As Lalon Shah says in one of his songs, “Worship the simple Man as divine/ Worship the human feet” and “You will get the/ Quintessence of reality.”⁷ The mystic cult of the Bauls involving sexual yoga rests on the conviction that human body can unravel the mystery of creation.⁸ An inevitable corollary of this belief is that all human beings are equal in term of any standard of caste, class, religion, gender, and region. Therefore, any type of discrimination that banks on these categories is an ideological formation of the hegemonic forces of the society. Thus the Bauls project liberal humanism through their songs and practices. They denounce any outward form of worship, such as mosque, temple, incense or beads—“The only outward form of worship of the baul is in his songs.”⁹

3. Lalon Shah as an outstanding Baul guru

The activities of the Baul sect were largely confined to ascetic practices until the appearance of Fakir Lalon Shah—his contribution widened its scope, leaving immense social and political implications. Lalon Shah was born to a Hindu family at Kumarkhali under Kushtia sub-division of Nadia district of Bengal in or around 1774.¹⁰ In his adult life, he caught smallpox while returning from a pilgrimage, and was thrown into the river by his companions who thought him dead. Then a Muslim woman rescued and nursed him to life. However, he was ostracized by the conservative Hindu society for eating in a Muslim household, which was tantamount to violation of caste norm. So Lalon Shah abandoned his home and took vows of a Baul. He established his *akhda*, or site for devotional practices, on the fringe of Kushtia town.

Lalon Shah’s traumatic personal experience seemed to have made him rebellious against the

⁵ Sufism was introduced in Bengal since the fourteenth century by Arab Sufi-saints who basically preached the spiritual and philosophical aspect of Islam instead of political Islam. Buddhist Sahajya philosophy, which flourished in the eight century Bengal, believed that that body embodies the universe.

⁶ Togawa Mashahiko, “Sharing the Narratives: An Anthropologist among the Local People at the mausoleum of Fakir Lalon Shah in Bangladesh.” 『イスラーム世界研究』 第6巻 (2013年3月) 21頁. <https://www.asafas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/kias/pdf/kb6/05togawa.pdf>. Access: 3 Apr, 2020.

⁷ Tanvir Mokammel, “Influence of Sufism on Lalon Fakir.” p. 3. <http://tanvirmokammel.com/home/images/stories/download/influence%20of%20sufism%20on%20lalon.pdf>. Access: 24 Apr, 2020.

⁸ Charles Capwell, “The Popular Expression of Religious Syncretism: The Bauls of Bengal as Apostles of Brotherhood.” *Popular Music*. Vol. 7. No. 2. The South Asia / West Crossover (May 1988). pp. 123-24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853531>.

⁹ Edward C. Dimock, Jr. 1959. p. 37.

¹⁰ Belonging to a tradition which was basically oral and discouraged a devotee from disclosing his or her personal details, Lalon Shah offers a rather hazy biography.

prejudices that hung on mainstream religions—he was victimized by the Hindu caste rule. More important, his mind was fed by the social and cultural milieu in which he lived. The town of Kumarkhali became the regional headquarter of the British East India Company's indigo production facilities and got early railway connection with the then capital city, Calcutta (presently Kolkata). Its commercial importance gradually made it a seat for education and literary and cultural activities. The reform-oriented Brahma Society was established here in 1848. In 1861, a monthly journal was launched under the editorship of Kangal Harinath who later turned to be a close friend of Lalon Shah. The town and its adjacent areas also experienced widespread peasant discontent due to the hardship generated by the exploitative policy of the colonial regime—the Indigo riots took place in this part of Bengal in 1859-60 AD.¹¹ With the spread of education, people were gradually becoming aware of the oppression based on caste, class and gender. On the whole, Lalon Shah's contemporary society was in a state of ferment in which questioning unjust traditions and resisting oppressive authority were almost the norms of the conscious section of people. Although Lalon Shah did not receive any formal education, he had the opportunity to sense the spirit of his age and courage to deploy the spiritually-oriented Baul movement as leverage for social and cultural revolt.

Lalon Shah's outright rejection of any institutional religion along with its ritual practices rests on the logic that outward signs cannot be a marker of the true essence of religion: "Everyone asks, what religious community does Lalon belong to?/ Lalon says, all life-long this issue has remained unresolved."¹² He argues that circumcision is used as an outward trace of a Muslim male while there is no such external mark on Muslim women. A Hindu higher caste Brahmin can be recognized by the thread that he wears, but there is no visible sign to identify a female Brahmin. Outward signs of religion are man-made; also they are made in favor of male. In this way, Lalon Shah reveals the contradictions in the practices of the two mainstream religions in his society.

Although Lalon Shah generously borrowed religious terms from both Hindu and Islamic texts, he always resisted from being labeled as either a Hindu or a Muslim. Two weeks after his death, a local fortnightly newspaper, *Hitokori*, commented that Lalon Shah himself did not belong to any communal religion, yet people belonging to any religion held him dear—because of his close interaction with Muslims, many thought him as a Muslim; on the other hand, followers of Hinduism mistook him as an adherent of *Vaisnavism*.¹³ Also many would think him as a member of the Brahma Society for his belief in the formless god and his denouncement of caste system. According to his wish his funeral did not observe any of the rites of either Hinduism or Islam. Thus his very life-pattern subverted the traditional structuring of a monolithic identity, offering an immense

¹¹ See Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury, "The Roots of Bangladeshi National Identity: Their Impact on State Behaviour." *ISAS Working Paper* No. 63 – Date: 10 June 2009 (Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore) p. 3.

¹² Trans. by Kabir Chowdhury in Sudhir Chakravarty, *Brattiyō Lokayoto Lalon* (Kolkata, Pustak Bipni, 2nd ed. 1998) pp. 227-228.

¹³ Sudhir Chakravarty, 1998. p. 30.

possibility of syncretic negotiation.

In song after song, Lalon Shah speaks about the irrationality and whim that are responsible for segregating human beings into different castes—the upper-caste people utilize caste system as a tool for oppressing the lower-caste people. Lalon Shah reveals the hypocrisy that lies behind the system of caste in the following lines: “What harm does it do to religion / When one secretly breaks bread with a fallen women?”¹⁴ Mixing with a caste-less sex worker in secret does not incur the risk of the violation of caste rule while drinking water from her pot in public is objectionable. Lalon Shah invalidates the caste rule by hinting at its inherent absurdities.

The Baul tradition, as already indicated, assigns a very high status to women who are conceived as ‘nature’—the union between nature and male is vital for understanding the true essence of the universe.¹⁵ June McDaniel’s findings reveal that only in the Baul tradition of Bengal women are considered as ritual equal in which “menstruation is both positive and spiritual and the woman’s body is sacred and the dwelling place of a deity.”¹⁶ Noticeably, nineteenth century Bengal experienced a remarkable achievement in the direction towards women emancipation through a number of reforms, such as the abolition of *suti*, child marriage and polygamy, and the enactment of the Widow Remarriage Act (1856). Lalon Shah’s songs bear testimony to his awareness of the issue; for instance, he puts more importance on mother than on father, saying, “By adulating mother/ One learns the identity of father.”¹⁷

Lalon Shah’s armed protest against the oppression of the then local landlord who attempted to harass the editor Kangal Harinath is a proof of how he championed the downtrodden people against their British or Indian oppressors.¹⁸ However, his songs were the principal medium by which he discursively lodged protest against those in political authority. Manjita Mukherji contends that Baul songs chose and deployed certain agrarian metaphors and images which constitute “partly sanitised, ambiguous, and coded version of the hidden transcript” and are “articulations of their everyday resistance against the changing agrarian systems of production in the years following the implementation of the notorious Permanent Settlement of 1793.”¹⁹ The following excerpt from one of Lalon Shah’s songs may provide an instance of such covert tactic:

God is the lord of the world,
Kept me as a mere subject

¹⁴ Trans. by Kabir Chowdhury in Abul Ahsan Choudhury, 2007. p. 233.

¹⁵ Abul Ahsan Choudhury, 2007. p. 95.

¹⁶ June McDaniel, “The Embodiment of God Among the Bauls of Bengal.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 8, No. 2 (Fall 1992), Indiana UP. p. 27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25002179>.

¹⁷ Tanvir Mokammel, p. 8.

¹⁸ See Jeanne Openshaw. *Seeking the Bauls of Bengal* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002) p. 29.

¹⁹ Manjita Mukherjee, “Reading the Metaphors in Baul Songs: Some Reflections on the Social History of Rural Colonial Bengal.” PhD Diss. (SOAS, University of London, 2009) p. 112.

If I fail to pay tax,
He punishes me
He does not pay heed to any excuse.²⁰

Here, on the pretext of discussing theology, Lalon Shah hints at the discontent caused by the over-taxation policy of the British Company rulers. There are many such instances of “the less noisy, less violent, more indirect and covert everyday forms of peasant resistance” in the songs of Lalon Shah.²¹

In his lifetime, Lalon Shah was able to initiate a vast number of devotees to the Baul cult. However, his “often beautiful and enigmatic songs” have given him an influence “far wider than the number would suggest.”²² At the same time, his radical attack on the institutional religions invited considerable protests from the conservatives of both Hindu and Muslim communities.²³ This dual legacy—acceptance and resistance to Lalon Shah and his songs—seems to have a permanent impact on the national identity formation in Bengal.

4. The Legacy of Fakir Lalon Shah to the formation of Bengali national identity

Lalon Shah’s clear understanding about the egalitarian principle that underlies human relations, and his uncompromising commitment to social justice and equity, brought what may be called ‘the rural renaissance’ in Bengal—and, in this respect particularly, he is often compared to Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), the father of the Indian reform movement. Lalon Shah’s popularity in the Bengali intellectual circle owed much to the appreciation of the Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), who happened to know about his songs (and his disciples) while staying at Sheldaidah, a place near Lalon *akhda*, from 1891 to 1901 to oversee his family estate.²⁴ Tagore collected and published a good number of Lalon songs. Tagore’s own poems, stories, novels, plays and essays bear testimony to the influence of Lalon Shah’s philosophy and music on them. In his novel *Gora* (1909), Tagore introduces a Baul character singing the following song of Lalon Shah:

Into the cage flies the unknown bird,
It comes I know not whence
Powerless my mind to chain its feet,

²⁰ Translation taken from Tanvir Mokammel’s feature film *Lalon* (2004).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrBJVVExa8o>.

²¹ Manjita Mukherjee, 2009. p. 110.

²² Jeanne Openshaw, 2002. p. 3.

²³ For details of the conservative reaction against Lalon, see Abul Ahsan Choudhury, 2007. pp. 83-94.

²⁴ Rabindranath Tagore came to Kushtia to take charge of his family estate after Lalon Shah’s death. His elder brother Jyotindranath Tagore portrayed the only surviving sketch of Lalon Shah.

It goes I know not where.²⁵

The search for the unknown who in fact resides in one's own body seems to be the core of Lalon Shah's Baul system. In his 1925 presidential lecture in Indian Philosophical Congress, titled "The Philosophy of Our People", Tagore pointed out that the Baul song was the extract of the long tradition of Indian philosophy on the spiritual union between a person and the universe. Comparing Lalon with the idealist Percy Bysshe Shelley, Tagore commented that the Baul's search for the unknown, unlike Shelley's, was rooted in reality: "only Shelley's utterance is for the cultural few while the Baul song is for the tillers of the soil, for the simple folk of our village households, who are never bored by its mystic transcendentalism."²⁶

Following Tagore, a number of renowned Bengali writers and academicians became interested in Lalon Shah. Of particular interest is the Baul influence on Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), the national poet of Bangladesh, who is popularly known as the 'rebel poet' for his rebellion against all types of oppression. Nazrul Islam declares in one of his songs, "I am a crazy Baul, my own body is my temple."²⁷ Lalon Shah, Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam seem to have formed together a powerful cultural trio of Bengali nationalism that calls for religious tolerance and co-existence. They were simultaneously poets and musicians—their songs have constituted three distinct and popular genres in Bengali music. Following Lalon Shah, Nazrul Islam composed songs taking themes from both Hindu and Muslim sources.

With regard to the construction of national identity, the year 1905 was a significant moment in the history of Bengal, when the province was divided into two wings by the colonial rulers apparently to bring about efficiency in administration. Later in 1912, the basically Hindu-led *swadeshi* movement forced the British to revoke the decision. Lalon Shah died in 1890; he even did not see that tumultuous event in Bengal history, yet his iconic image as an epitome of pure Bengali tradition provided fresh impetus to the *swadeshi* movement. Rabindrath Tagore, who initially supported the movement, published a book in 1905 containing nationalistic songs in which he appropriated the tune of Baul songs. The book itself was titled *Baul*—the title "was meant to symbolize something irreducibly Bengali. The Bauls for Tagore were the soul of an indivisible Bengal."²⁸ One of Tagore's 1905 songs, "My Golden Bengal", has later been adopted as the national anthem of Bangladesh.

The Hindu revivalist trend that became associated with the *swadeshi* movement alienated the Muslim public—it was the first noticeable sign of the Hindu-Muslim rupture in Bengal. The event

²⁵ Rabindranath Tagore (trans.). *Gora* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2002) p. 1.

²⁶ Sisir Kumar Das, ed. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume Three, A Miscellany* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, rptd. 1999) pp. 561-62.

²⁷ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFk85P3GZVY>. Translation mine.

²⁸ Charles Capwell, 1988. p. 125.

had made many Muslim inhabitants aware of “a new rift between their Bengali and Muslim selves. For the first time, they felt, they had to choose which was the dominant one.”²⁹ However, for the poor Muslim people of East Bengal, economic well-being mattered more than religion, so they were not much interested in joining Pakistan created on the basis of religion. Yet, during the partition of India in 1947, East Bengal was annexed to Pakistan against the will of those leaders who were representing the common people of the region.

Lalon Shah seemed to have been under the crossfire of the conflicting identity politics that unfolded in Pakistan after 1947. When the process of Islamization was on its height in the 50s and 60s, the conservative religious clerics denounced his songs and philosophy as a threat to the Islamic state. However, for the majority of the leading writers and intellectuals of East Pakistan (East Bengal) and West Bengal, Lalon Shah’s tireless efforts to establish communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims were the main focus of attention. A prominent Bengali folklorist, Muhammad Monsur Uddin, who collected Baul songs for around five decades since the 1930s, publishing them in volumes under the title of *Lost Gems*, termed these songs as a meeting of the mind between the uneducated masses of the both communities. Under his initiative, Lalon Shah’s mausoleum was built in 1963, yet it is claimed that certain people loyal to the Pakistan regime set out to prove his Islamic attachment by designing his mausoleum after the architectural style of the famous *majar*, or graveyard, of the renowned Muslim scholar and Sufi-saint, Nizamuddin Aulia (1238-1325) of New Delhi.³⁰

Immediately after the creation of Pakistan, tension flared up between its east and west wings. In East Pakistan, Islam made its inroads through the initiatives of the Sufi-saints whereby some local beliefs merged with the Islamic beliefs, giving rise to a vast space for syncretic and porous practices.³¹ This ‘vernacular’ Islam was denounced as impure by the ruling elite of Pakistan, who undertook a project to ‘purify’ Bengali Muslims by imposing Urdu, instead of Bengali, as the state language. This very action released a huge force of ethno-linguistic nationalism in East Pakistan, which culminated in the liberation war of 1971, leading to the creation of a new nation-state, Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, two conflicting trends seemed to have emerged as role players in the formation of the mainstream versions of national identity.³² The ‘establishment nationalists’, who led the struggle for Bangladesh relying on ethno-linguistic and secular Bengali nationalism, got challenged

²⁹ Willem Van Schendel. *A History of Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Cambridge UP, 2009) p. 201.

³⁰ See Sudhir Chakravarty, 1998. p. 28.

³¹ See Sanjay K. Bhardwaj, “Contesting Identities in Bangladesh: A Study of Religious and Secular Frontiers.” Asia Research Centre Working Paper 36. London School of Economics & Political Science. 2009-10. p.7.

³² See Willem Van Schendel, “Who Speaks for the Nation: Nationalist Rhetoric and the Challenge of Cultural Pluralism in Bangladesh.” *Identity Politics in Central Asia and the Muslim World: Nationalism, Ethnicity and Labour in the Twentieth Century* (Eds. William van Schendel and Eric J. Zürcher. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2001) pp. 108-10.

by ‘the religious nationalists’ asserting that the state should be ruled on the basis of Islamic principles and the identity of the people should be ‘Bangladeshi’ instead of ‘Bengali’ by which they wanted to demarcate the Bengali people of Bangladesh from those of West Bengal. The tussle between these two forces has been operative till now; they have alternately taken control of the government, which has enabled them to influence the ‘civil society’ through the machineries of the hegemonic ‘political society’. While the secular nationalists and the religious nationalists have been vying for dominance, another pluralist version of identity has always been present, addressing the rights of different ethnic groups, minorities and non-conformist voices.³³ Van Schendel writes:

In analyzing Bangladesh society, writers overwhelmingly privilege ‘Muslim’ and ‘Hindu’ as mutually exclusive, oppositional and monolithic terms. It is crucial to recognize that there has always been strong cultural resistance in Bangladesh to such bipolar categorization . . . at the most basic religious level. Insistence on spiritual unity rather than opposition is perhaps most vocally expressed in the devotional songs of a community known as the Baul, who identify themselves as followers of the path of unorthodoxy.³⁴

The anti-foundational stance of Lalon Shah’s songs helps the Bauls scrutinize symptoms of injustice and inequality in the practice of both Hinduism and Islam and, at the same time, offers a syncretic hint that all religions are in essence committed to peace and social harmony.

With the spread of education and media culture, Lalon Shah’s songs began to go on air. Many of the Bauls are now invited by private TV channels to sing live. Again, a number of high-profile Lalon singers are not Bauls—they do not live in Lalon Shah’s *akhda*, instead they have learned songs from professional music teachers. They usually sing with modern musical instruments, like guitar and keyboard, alongside (or without) the iconic *ektara* or ‘one stringed musical instrument’ associated with the Bauls. The aim is to stage Lalon Shah’s songs to entertain the audience who are interested in the surface meaning without bothering to penetrate the context. As a result, “the audience remains uninitiated to the compositions’ consistent negation, in an aesthetically discreet manner, of the bondage of any institutional religion down the centuries at the grass-root level.”³⁵ Benjamin Krakauer’s fieldwork experience in West Bengal identifies the tendency of the affluent Bengalis to construct a “highly romanticized, spiritualized, and folkloricized ideals of Baul-Fakir identity.”³⁶ Bengali artists and intellectuals define their own identity discursively by appropriating

³³ See Willem van Schendel, 2009. p. 211.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 37.

³⁵ P. M. Abu Ishahoque Hossain, “The Sage and the Society: Lalon Shah and 19th Century Social Movements in Bengal.” (Phd. Diss. University of Dhaka, 2017) p. 239.

³⁶ Benjamin Krakauer, “The Ennobling of a ‘Folk Tradition’ and the Disempowerment of the Performers: Celebrations and Appropriations of Baul-Fakir Identity in West Bengal.” *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 59. No. 3. University of Illinois Press, (Fall 2015), p. 356.

signifiers of Baul-Fakir identity, but this is done at the cost of the disempowerment of the actual Baul-Fakirs who are conceived with some inflated binaries—while they are the actual bearers of pure Bengali tradition, they are unpragmatic and unworldly, and while their performance can be celebrated, no urban youth would like to accept the model of their poverty-ridden rural living. Yet, as Krakauer argues, the Bauls have been instrumental in valorizing Bengali identity as perceived by the people of the West Bengal: “Although [West] Bengal does not comprise a nation-state, there is nevertheless a strong sense of a Bengali nationality among Bengalis.”³⁷ In both West Bengal and Bangladesh, the reception of the Bauls and their songs comprises cultural significations which are essentially secular and disruptive of the narrative of identity forwarded by the religious nationalists.

Meanwhile, Lalon Shah’s mausoleum has been a site of contention, expressing the same religious-secular dichotomy that has always made its presence felt in the national identity formation process in Bangladesh. A couple of incidents in the recent past seems to unfold a pattern in which Lalon Shah’s mausoleum and his disciples, the practicing Bauls living there, have been subjected to the cultural politics of absorption and the homogenizing attempt of the nation state. For instance, in 1984, the then Islamic-leaning government of Bangladesh attempted to evict the ‘heretic’ Bauls from Lalon Shah’s mausoleum to make it an Islamic religious center.³⁸ Again, in the first decade of this century, the secular-leaning government took the initiative to modernize the site of Lalon Shah’s mausoleum to promote Bengali culture as well as tourism industry.³⁹ However, this narrative of development became highly contested, as the Bauls complained that establishing any modern complex would infringe upon their freedom of movement, a fundament condition for practicing their cult, and their stance was supported by the progressive-minded intellectuals and cultural activists.

5. Conclusion

Lalon Shah seems to have advocated that version of national identity which calls for “a plurality of religio-political identities.”⁴⁰ With the influence of the changing socio-political scenario, the original conception of the Baul has undergone modification. Nevertheless, there has been a persistent flow of the basic ideals of Lalon Shah at the folk level, which can be noticed in the three-day festival annually held during his death anniversary, in which Lalon artists and admirers from all parts of Bangladesh, even from West Bengal, throng Lalon *akhda*.⁴¹ Nowadays, most of the people do not even bother to think whether Lalon was a heretic or not, rather they endorse his vernacular version of secularism. Those who nurture and promote freethinking and liberal ideology present Lalon as their ‘guru’, their inspiration.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/ethnomusicology.59.3.0355>.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 375.

³⁸ Togawa Mashahiko, 2013. p. 25.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 27.

⁴⁰ Willem van Schendel, 2001. p. 111.

⁴¹ For live broadcast of this year’s event see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1AO60KxnD4>.